Why is this trash can yelling at me?

Why is this Trash Can Yelling at Me? Big Bellies and Clean Green Gentrification

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"HEY THERE GOOD LOOKING!" On a misty December day in downtown Brooklyn, my walk along Fulton Street was interrupted by a slew of high-tech trashcans trying to grab my attention. "PSSST!" The trash cans called out. "HEY YOU! Yeah, you! You see that up there? That spot for recycling? Use it. Go on, I can take it." These were no ordinary trash-cans. They were Big Bellies – solar powered trash compactors that promise to reduce litter, save fuel, and show off the green credentials of any environment they inhabit. But infrastructure – the large-scale technical systems comprised of pipes, cables, tubes, satellites, standards, maintenance, expertise, grids and all the rest – is meant to be silent and invisible. Infrastructures are the material foundations of everyday life; if you don't notice them, it means they are working properly. So why were these trashcans yelling at me, calling attention to themselves and spilling the public secret of infrastructure? Part of a process of spatial transformation, Big Bellies mark changes in Fulton Street and similar commercial zones across American cities, participating in making place by materially and symbolically redefining who does and does not belong in the high-tech green cities of the future they promise. The unintended exclusions these bins create reveal a powerful tension at the core of American visions of a clean green urban future.

[Image 1(photo credit: author) caption: "PSSST! There's something really special happening here. I'm collecting five times more trasn than the other guys and using solar energy to compact it all. WELCOME TO DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN. Where even the trash bins are high tech." Fulton St, Downtown Brooklyn.]

The rule of infrastructural invisibility is especially true for waste management systems designed to make trash out of sight, out of mind. Managing municipal waste is largely about producing 'away' – a series of spaces, often hidden in plain sight, that conceal garbage from sight and smell.[1] Even as Americans are surrounded by our daily wastes, an elaborate infrastructure constructs 'aways' that connect the most intimate to the most alienating spaces of urban life: waste paper baskets in every room, trash cans on street corners, dumpsters behind or underneath every restaurant, big-box store, office park, or apartment building, municipal depots full of trash trucks delivering waste to hidden landfills and incinerators invisible to all but the disproportionately poor, black, and brown neighborhoods that host them[2]. Even the sanitation

[1]Joshua Reno, *Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016)

[2] Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

workers who make this infrastructure work wear uniforms that function as invisibility cloaks, obscuring them from everyday perceptibility.[3]

During crises, ruptures in service reveal the material systems and forms of labor that sustain urban life and bring infrastructure to public attention. Blackouts bring electric grids to the forefront of public attention. Floods make levies objects of everyday conversation. Sanitation workers strikes make cities' daily reliance on infrastructural labor sensually apparent. Aside from crises, the other typical moment of infrastructural visibility is ceremonial. Ribbon cuttings ritualize infrastructure, calling attention to new systems, completed projects, innovative design. As rituals, they mark progress by breaking with the status-quo of infrastructural invisibility, inaugurating a liminal period of attention and affect that energizes communal feelings, and returning the public to normal life. Politicians love to cut ribbons. Cutting ribbons indexes progress, completion, goods delivered and promises kept. Infrastructural visibility in these scenes serves to constitute political authority, legitimize leadership, and reproduce bonds of community and visions of the public.

[Image 2 (photo credit: author) caption: "One Goal Many Hands. These bins will help us become America's Greenest City" LOVE Park, Philadelphia.]

In 2009, Big Bellies appeared on the streets of Philadelphia as Mayor Michael Nutter ceremonially cut a green ribbon from around a bin and threw it away. Standing behind the Big Belly, a colleague held a cup, a plastic bottle and a newspaper that she handed to the mayor who, in turn, passed them on to a casually dressed teenager who posed for photos – and a video preserving the event for YouTube – before recycling the debris. The ceremony marked the roll-out of Big Bellies in downtown Philadelphia. Replacing 700 wire bins, the Big Bellies were part of a $14-million grant the city received from the Department of Energy, secured in order to transform Philadelphia into the nation's greenest city. Since, an additional 450 bins have been purchased – at between three and four thousand dollars each – and deployed around the city's business districts.

[Image 3 (photo credit: author): "PHILLY THROWS GREEN." City Hall, Philadelphia]

In dark-green letters against a light-green background, the side of Philadelphia's bins reads: "PHILLY THROWS GREEN this solar compactor cuts trash volume by 80% to conserve truck fuel and landfill space" and "ONE GOAL, MANY HANDS/ THESE BINS WILL HELP US BECOME AMERICA'S GREENEST CITY!" Like the Big Bellies in downtown Brooklyn, these trashcans are powered by a solar panel on top of the bin and include a laser sensor that triggers a compactor when the bin fills up. After eating 150-200 gallons of garbage the belly fills up and another sensor detects that the compactor has reached capacity, sending a signal to a central dispatch indicating that it is time to empty the bin. These bins were expected to cut trash collection trips by 75%. Because trash trucks get only 3 miles per gallon, this would save the city's budget and carbon footprint. Moreover, these bins promise to reduce the amount of work required to manage downtown waste, all while keeping litter off the street.

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[3] Robin Nagel, *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2014).

In Philadelphia, Big Bellies are part of an effort to rebrand the through green futurism. *Greenworks*, Mayor Nutter's 2009 six-year plan makes this explicit: "for decades, Philadelphia has felt obsolete – a fine old relic of the past. It's been a while since anyone walked down the streets of Philadelphia and concluded 'Yes, this is the future.' But many people are doing that these days […] and will feel that this is exactly the kind of city that the future demands." Images of Big Bellies saturate *Greenworks*, grounding this feeling of technologically sophisticated green futurity in material objects. Infrastructure becomes visible here in order to build a new public consensus around this future, attaching affect to municipal policy and planning. *Greenworks*'s language appears inclusive, offering a universal bright green future. It is full of uses of the royal we and promises to citizens, residents, 'ourselves' and 'our children.'

This collective, 'we,' – the citizenry of the green future – is constructed and made active through precisely these kinds of documents and the material transformations they engender. But this collective urban subject is constructed through a specific set of inclusions and exclusions. As is typical in American environmental thought, 'our children' and 'generations still to come' are the figures through which futures are conjured and made to matter, privileging virtual future generations over existing youth.[4] Likewise, the word homeowner appears features heavily in the text, while the homeless do not appear. The green future thus couples citizenship and property, anchoring the Philadelphia's future in propertied urban residents while marginalizing ongoing crises of affordable housing and homelessness.

As in Philadelphia and Brooklyn, municipal governments, business improvement districts, chambers of commerce, real-estate developers, hospitals, and college campuses around the United States have invested in Big Bellies to manage wastes and appearances, marking new eras in urban life and seeking to conjure new urban publics that are clean, green, and smart. Because of the diversity of institutions that fund them, Big Bellies are not typically rolled out as comprehensive city-wide waste management systems. Rather, they mark different districts within cities. In this sense, they are part of the pattern that geographers Steve Graham and Simon Marvin refer to 'splintering urbanism'[5], the process by which urban infrastructural services are unbundled, privatized, and differentially made available to narrow populations and targeted niche markets. While Philadelphia's bins are green and promote that city as the greenest in America, Downtown Brooklyn's mirror the sky blue reflecting of the area's brand new luxury condos and promote Downtown as smart and high-tech, "the cleanest neighborhood in the city," where even the trash bins are high-tech."

Since 2009, Big Belly marketing has shifted from focusing on environmental benefits to emphasizing the bins' intelligence. This shift is typical of technocratic responses to the anthropocene, based on the asuumption that planetary ecological crises can and should be addressed as technical problems resolved through technological innovation and entrepreneurship. Today, Big Bellies are "leveraging the power of cloud computing combined with smart,

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[4] Natasha Lennard, "Against a Dream Deferred" (*The New Inquiry*, Feb 2, 2012. available online: https://thenewinquiry.com/against-a-dream-deferred/ [accessed July 1, 2017])

[5] Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

connected technology to provide actionable data & analysis," they "capture & analyze real time data from smart, connected stations," in order to "improve public space quality of life & increase operational efficiency"[6] In his typically techno-euphoric style, Thomas Friedman hails these bins: "yes, even the garbageman is a tech worker now"[7] – suggesting that even the most gritty forms of infrastructural labor will be dematerialized, rendered virtual and smart through accelerating innovation. Big Bellies promise clean, green, and smart, almost self-managing, cities. They provide both sanitary and knowledge services to cities, reducing the volume of material waste by creating a parallel virtual stream of data about waste. But downtown Big Bellies are unusually conspicuous infrastructures. Their role is not just to manage waste and data, but to mark and make place in particular ways. Big Bellies play a vital role in neighborhood making, signaling the rebranding of downtown Brooklyn as a hub of technology, innovation, and high-rise condominiums (often featuring brightly on ads on the side of Big Bellies).

[Image 4 (photo credit: author) Caption – "Cleanest Neighborhood in the City" and "The Ashland, Flatbush Ave, Downtown Brooklyn.]

The downtown section of Fulton Street has long been a both a driver and a barometer of changes in the social composition and cultural politics of Brooklyn, transformed by successive waves of urban development, brownstone gentrification, suburban white-flight, and a post-2008 financial crisis explosion of luxury high-rise construction.[8] A touchstone locale in Hip Hop through songs like Leschaea's 1996 hit "Fulton Street" ("And finally it's you and me / And this is how it's spose to be / Cruisin' down on Fulton Street / Cruisin' down on Fulton Street") and Biz Markie's 1988 song "Albee Square Mall" ("But the Albee Square Mall is the doo-doo-def / I be in there everyday, walkin around chillin / From when they opened all the way until when / It's about time for the place to close / I'm just running things like a pair of panty hose"), over the last decade Fulton Street has undergone a dramatic transformation. Once associated with black and latinx youth culture, Fulton Street was characterized by heterogeneous forms of retail from national department stores, to locally owned store-fronts and street vendors selling books, electronics, beauty products, and clothing targeting the area's primarily black and immigrant shoppers. By contrast, the new Fulton Mall is dominated by the typical set of retailers familiar to any downtown or ex-urban shopping center in the country: Gap, Old Navy, and H&M alongside an ever smaller number of independent shoe stores and jewelers that remain in place. The new Fulton Mall is typical of what Biju Mathew, in his ethnography of the city's taxi industry,[9] characterizes as the suburbanization of New York in which youth cultures and the everyday

[6] www.Bigbelly.com

[7] Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimists's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2016).

[8] On the history of Fulton Street in particular and Downtown Brooklyn in general, see Rosten Woo and Meredith TenHoor, *Street Value: Shopping, Planning and Politics on Fulton Street* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010); Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Themis Chronopoulos, "African Americans, Gentrification, and Neoliberal Urbanization: the Case of Fort Greene, Brooklyn" (*Journal of African American Studies* 20(3-4): 294-322, 2016); Carolyn Thompson, "Discourses of Community Contestation: The Fight Over the Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, New York" (*Urban Geography* 32(8): 1189-1207, 2011).

[9] Biju Mathew, *Taxi! Cabs and Capitalism in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

forms of sociality and the pleasures of seeing and being seen celebrated by Biz Markie and Leschaea are recast as problematic loitering. What distinguishes suburbanized urban cores from their non-urban counterparts is no longer the types of business, but their packaging - downtown malls' distinctiveness is their urban feel, an added value that threatens to become disruptive and is in constant need of sanitization, both metaphorical and real.

Enter the Big Belly, promising to manage litter and tacitly participating in the project of social sanitation as they materially enforce normative views of what populations and practices should occupy city streets. With their compactors, Big Bellies manage the litter – especially empty coffee and soda cups - that might otherwise overflow city trash bins. They are also involved in the management of surplus populations, rolled-out in gentrifying contexts where one mode of commerce makes room for another. Streets like Fulton Mall have been subject to intensified criminalization of street vending and increased policing of non-normative ways of occupying public space. Across New York, these range from stop-and-frisk, to crackdowns on quality of life violations such as the fatal policing of informal livelihood strategies like selling loose cigarettes as with Eric Garner, to raids on immigrant African street vendors. Together, these revanchist modes of regulating space, authorized through the discourse of broken-windows policing, act to remake the image and accessibility of the city. Big Bellies do not simply arrive in and symbolically participate in these spatial transformations; they are materially involved in transforming urban economies.

[Image 5 (photo credit: Joanna Steinhardt). Open ended and sorted bin, Grand Ave, Oakland CA]

As several ethnographers of American homelessness have documented, access to the urban waste stream constitutes a vital resource for cities' most marginalized residents. Anne Lovell,[10] for instance, argues that New York's traffic in waste provides not only the material elements through which homeless people assemble interstitial lives and living spaces, but also reflects struggles for moral agency and ways of understanding and critiquing socio-spatial marginality. In her ethnography of life on the streets of San Francisco, Teresa Gowan[11] describes a moral economy of recycling in which the labor of collecting empty cans and bottles provides both a critical source of revenue and a vital source of identity for homeless men who seek dignity in manual work, even as they are excluded from the formal labor market. Likewise, the 2015 documentary *Dogtown Redemption* illustrates the centrality of recycling economies for formerly incarcerated people, immigrants, and other people excluded from the formal labor market and denied necessary mental health care in Oakland, California. Protesting the closure of the recycling center that pays for recyclables by the pound at a city-hall meeting, one of the films protagonists praises the admittedly exploitative recycling industry as the best viable alternative to mugging and petty theft. Others in the film describe recycling as a springboard to faith-based

[10] Anne Lovell, "Hoarders and Scrappers: Madness and the Social Person in the Interstices of the City" In *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, edited by João Biehl, Byron Good and Arthur Kleinman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007: 315-340).

[11] Teresa Gowan, *Hobos Hustlers and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

redemption, moral uplift, and a path out of addiction and off the city's streets. Shopping carts and other improvised infrastructures of informal collection are a frequent presence on North American city streets, moving through commercial and residential districts alike to reap the recyclable bounty discarded on a daily basis. Big Bellies interrupt these alternative waste streams, reconfigure the geography of waste by excluding informal recyclers deemed insufficiently smart, clean, and green.

Big Bellies enact a form of enclosure, sealing off downtown wastes, once available as a quasi-common resource, behind locked doors. This design is neither necessary nor inevitable, existing trash cans in Oakland, for instance, offer both a large bin for garbage and a smaller accessible surface for recyclables. Many Big Bellies come in pairs, a compactor for waste, and a regular bin with a small opening for recyclables. In contrast to the wire bins they replace, once objects enter either of the Big Belly's bins, they are cast as waste once and for all, inaccessible and unsalvageable. In doing so, Big Bellies remove the streets they clean from the itineraries of informal recyclers and further transform the material conditions of belonging and exclusion. In this respect, Big Bellies can be considered a form of hostile architecture alongside sloped benches, spiked planters, and pavement sprinklers, technologies designed to keep people moving, to privilege circulation over inhabitation, and to make impossible the interstitial forms of shelter and rest that characterize homeless life. Big Bellies green these subtle modes of displacement, attaching the positive environmentalist affect to exclusionary hostile architecture. While it is not clear that Big Bellies are designed to have this effect, they have been rolled out in increasingly hostile socio-spatial contexts and form part of a broader assemblage of policing practices, architectural features, and enclosures of public space that symbolically define and materially distribute urban belonging.

Regardless of the intent behind the design, Big Bellies give this exclusionary assemblage smart and green credentials, wrapping hostile urbanism in the colors of technology, innovation, and environmentalism. With their shout of "Hey You," they name and unite those who turn, hailed by their call: a narrow set of subjects who feel recognized as clean and green, smart and proper urban subjects, the shopper discarding an empty Starbucks cup, not the recycler looking for cans. Even if it is not their intent, in effect Big Bellies participate in the material and symbolic remaking of urban space in predictably exclusionary ways. As such, they offer a caution against forms the common environmentalist tendency to seek technological solutions to complexly entangled ecological and social problems with little to no attention to the material and political contexts in which these technologies are deployed. This tendency, embodied in the hundreds of uplifting viral videos featuring innovative silver bullet solutions to persistent crises of waste and pollution, is a form of high-tech fetishism that haunts American environmentalism at the expense of more thoroughgoing analyses of the intersections of social and environmental injustice. Far from unique to Big Bellies, race and class based exclusion recurs through the history of American environmentalism, from the construction of a wilderness ideal predicated on the erasure of native peoples to the priority historically given to the politics of conservation over issues of environmental racism.[12] As cities become more and more critical cites of environmental

[12] Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

intervention it is vital to be attentive to ways this history persists and takes shape in new material assemblages.

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